



HOW CAN THE PSALMS ENCOURAGE THE CHURCH?

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The Psalms is a collection of ancient songs which are more than two millennia old. Furthermore, they are written mainly from the experiences and expectations of both David and the Israelites (as a group)¹. These people were surrounded by others close to them, such as the Moabites, Ammonites from Lot, the Edomites from Esau, and the Syrians related to Laban. These nations were in constant conflict with Israel as Israel struggled to remain faithful to God.

The Psalms provide us insights into these secret struggles. The Israelites placed their trust in and never gave up on their God, despite all the challenges and doubts they faced. They persevered through pilgrimage, living in tents, slavery in Egypt, wilderness wanderings, cycles of deliverance and captivity, as well as the rise and fall of the kingdom period². Amid all these, can anyone find practical blessing and lasting peace?

While our lives are different from the Israelites then, we can learn from their principles of faith because we too are a people who trust God. In our Christian walk, we experience similar but lesser struggles. If Israel could confront and overcome their challenges, how much more so should we be able to do so with God's help? May we be inspired to glean much encouragement from the Psalms.

Each psalm can be considered from at least five different aspects:

- 1 Positionally (geographically/historically/culturally)—What practical problem were they facing?
- 2 Poetically—not all the 'word pictures' are meant to be literal; we need to be careful in discerning the distinctions between literal and figurative speech.
- 3 Personally—What character and principle of God was displayed?
- 4 Practically—Which life stage or situation can we trust God in?
- 5 Prophetically—How can the records and reminders of God's covenant and promise encourage us to look forward to our final deliverance?

¹ A clear example of how a psalm has both an individual and group aspect is Psalm 118. Verses 1–4: a group expectation or claim to promise; verse 5 onwards: an individual experience of salvation.

² The kingdom period started with King Saul and ended with both Israel/Ephraim and Judah's dispersion to foreign lands (Assyria and Babylon).

Briefly, Psalms 1 and 2 can be considered a combined introduction to the entire collection of Psalms. In Psalm 1, we have the blessed Man and in Psalm 2, we have God's anointed King. Both are guided and governed by God's instructions, laws and promises. When we examine the details, true blessing cannot be divorced from our relationship with God and His King. We need to worship and trust both Adonai and His Son (Psa. 2:11–12).

Psalms 40 and 41 close Book 1 with realistic and practical blessings. In Psalm 40, there is One who trusted in God despite 'waiting in the pits', cherishing God's Word in His heart (Psa. 40:1–8). Surely 'he' corresponds to the blessed Man in Psalm 1. And in Psalm 41, there is One who practised God's instructions, having the poor in mind even with betrayal at a personal level (Psa. 41:1, 9). Truly, God is the only One who can guarantee deliverance in such predicaments.

Psalms 3 to 39 are mostly about the psalmist's complaints and struggles against personal sin, fears and depression, enemies' plots and even national threats. In all situations, he cried out to his God, continued to be blessed and hence delivered, though much patience was usually needed.

Several times the psalmist found himself in near-death circumstances, whether from his own folly or his ever-ready enemies. However, he never gave up on God's covenant and instructions. May we be encouraged by these poetic testimonies and follow their examples.

'How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!' (Psa. 2:12)

Note: The 'Thursday Bible Reading' has been looking at the Psalms and recently completed Book 1 (Psa. 1–41).

